

Smart from the Start

OVERVIEW

FOUNDED 2008 | **CURRENT REVENUE** \$915,000

DESCRIPTION: Smart from the Start is a family support and community engagement initiative whose goal is to close the educational achievement gap among children from Boston's lowest 10 percent income families. Initiated by Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino, Smart from the Start expands and strengthens early learning opportunities for children from birth to age five, promotes parents' roles as their children's first teachers, and builds neighborhood will, understanding, and capacity to support school readiness. Smart from the Start's *strengths-based approach* reaches out to the city's most vulnerable families and gives them the tools, resources, and support they need to break cycles of generational poverty and chronic school underachievement. Directly and through partner organizations, Smart from the Start provides a range of programs: from prenatal classes and play-to-learn groups to adult education and parent support. All programs are customized to meet the unique needs of the communities they serve. Smart from the Start's vision is that all children will enter school with the cognitive, language, physical, and social/emotional assets that lead to school and subsequent life success.

INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITY: Smart from the Start is seeking \$800,000 over two years to support its growth to a total of eight low-income Boston neighborhoods.

THE NEED

Consequences for low-income children raised in families without adequate support can be severe. These children often miss out on the literacy-rich home environment that boosts cognitive skills of middle- and upper-income children before they even set foot in a kindergarten classroom.

- Children from low-income families score lower on academic tests prior to kindergarten than children from high-income families.
- By age four, the average low-income child has heard 30 million fewer words than his or her higher-income peers.
- Third-grade reading scores on the 2007 MCAS show a 24-point gap between Boston's low-income children and their higher-income peers.
- Studies show that half the achievement gap in grade 12 is attributed to gaps that already existed in grade 1.

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR SOCIAL IMPACT

Investing early in children is the most effective way to close the achievement gap. For our most vulnerable children, investing in their families and communities is necessary to provide opportunities for future success.

- The economic benefits of quality early childhood interventions are significant, producing a \$14-\$17 return for every \$1 invested. This includes increased tax revenue produced in the workforce and savings from reduced special education and remedial education, welfare, and prison costs.
- Smart from the Start's approach – integrating strengths-based family support and community engagement in school readiness programs – is a particularly effective strategy for those at the lowest income levels.
- Since its founding, Smart from the Start has improved school readiness for over 600 children and is poised to expand its impact across the city of Boston.

TWO-YEAR GOALS

- Reach 1,000 children by expanding programming in existing neighborhoods and starting programming in two additional low-income neighborhoods
- Increase and diversify funding for long-term sustainability
 - Commence developing individual donor base
 - Organize first professional training conference
 - Focus on increasing government support
- Continue to build evaluation and assessment capacity to enhance understanding of program effectiveness

WAYS TO INVEST

Financial

- \$100,000 – Sponsors first-year costs to start a new site (staff, program, equipment, and materials)
- \$10,000 – Sponsors a multiple-site financial literacy and career planning program for parents
- \$1,000 – Sponsors a multiple-site family leadership training

In-Kind

- Advisory board members
- Two to three vans or minibuses for family transportation
- Baby layette items or gift cards

“Smart from the Start has proven that creative and innovative educational programs for children ages 0-5 and their families are vital for future learning. We want all of our young children to excel in school, which allows them to excel in life, and Smart from the Start is one of our best tools to make this happen.”

–Boston Mayor Tom Menino

SOCIAL INNOVATION IN ACTION – THE SMART FROM THE START MODEL

Smart from the Start takes an ecological approach to improving educational outcomes by working on three levels: community, family, and child. While most agencies focus on one level or two at the most, Smart from the Start believes that the needs of children cannot be addressed in isolation from their families, and in turn, the needs of families cannot be addressed in isolation from their communities. Therefore, the Smart from the Start model works to build community



capacity to embrace and support school-readiness activities by engaging and enlisting the support of formal and informal community stakeholders, business proprietors, and other community support agencies. On the family level, Smart from the Start works in partnership with caregivers to develop and implement programs to help them improve their self-sufficiency, feel better about their lives, and assist them in supporting their children's development. Finally, Smart from the Start provides a host of opportunities for young children to engage in fun, educational activities to promote school readiness, and it provides books and learning materials for them to take home. This multipronged approach not only prepares children and families for success, but it also creates an infrastructure that will sustain this work and rebuild the village it takes to raise young children.

Outreach: Smart from the Start's focus on families who are isolated and living with a multitude of challenges requires a creative outreach strategy. To engage and enroll families, Smart from the Start staff knock on doors in and around housing developments, and visit playgrounds, barbershops, and other locations where families with children go. Smart from the Start also connects with existing service providers to identify families in need and to help close gaps in service and support.

Relationship Building: Smart from the Start's strengths-based approach is a major cornerstone of the program's early success. Many social service providers are trained to assess families in need from a deficit-based/medical model, looking at "what's wrong" and how to fix it. Smart from the Start recognizes the incredible strengths and resiliency of the families with whom it works. This approach enables the program to nurture trusting, mutually respectful relationships with families who have been reluctant to engage in traditional social services. Smart from the Start's staff works with parents to build on their strengths and improve outcomes for their families by helping them set and achieve goals. Families that have struggled with numerous, seemingly insurmountable issues have now started their own small businesses, gone back to school, learned to speak English, entered the job market, sought treatment for substance abuse and/or left abusive partners. Through its work, Smart from the Start hopes to advance a system-wide paradigm shift that will lead all service providers to adopt a strengths-based approach.

Programming: Smart from the Start began its work by engaging community stakeholders and families in designing and developing programming that is culturally and linguistically appropriate and meets the unique needs of the community. It now offers a menu of programs and services ranging from prenatal classes and infant/caregiver and play-to-learn groups to adult education, English as a Second Language, and parent support, empowerment, and leadership programs. In many cases, Smart from the Start partners with existing providers, such as Early Intervention and WIC, to facilitate programming and increase access and use of existing community resources. Smart from the Start also started a campaign encouraging local businesses and agencies to sign on as "Community Unity

SMART FROM THE START FAMILY DEMOGRAPHICS

- \$8,000 median annual income
- 77% unemployed
- 48% have not graduated from high school or have no GED
- 73% single parents

CURRENT LOCATIONS

- Charlestown
- Mattapan
- Dorchester
- Roslindale
- Roxbury

Partners.” Smart from the Start provided many of them with play-to-learn materials and books to give to young children, thus making them more child- and family-friendly and providing new opportunities for young children to learn and grow in the places their families frequent. As a result, hair salons, pizza parlors, bodegas, and laundromats have become learning hubs for Boston's young children, and business owners have a deeper understanding of how they can contribute to the success of children in their communities.

TEAM AND GOVERNANCE

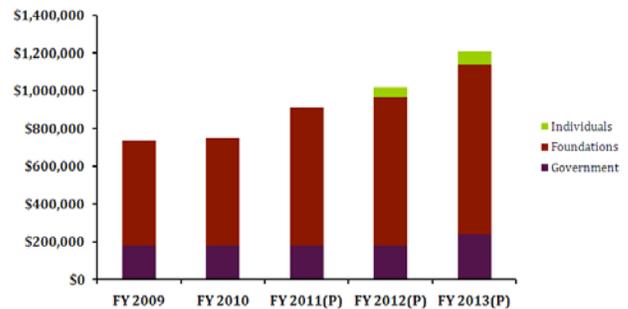
Cherie Craft was selected to be the first Executive Director for Smart from the Start, and she has shaped the program based on her extensive personal and professional experience. Previously, Cherie held numerous positions at Boston Medical Center, including Director of the Pediatric Department’s Family and Community Support Program. She has provided social and organizational services consultations to numerous publicly and privately funded nonprofit organizations across the country. Having grown up in public housing in inner-city Boston, Cherie possesses a strong commitment to working tirelessly to better the lives of at-risk children and families. Cherie serves as senior faculty with the National Institute for Family Centered Care and has served two terms as a member of the National Expert Panel on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare. The Smart from the Start staff reflects the diversity of backgrounds and experiences of the families it serves, and each site has a Site-Based Advisory Committee comprised of local service providers, community stakeholders, and family members. In addition, a Family Leadership and Advisory Team, a group of 12 families from diverse backgrounds with representation from each of the sites, provides input to the overall program. Smart from the Start has the support and guidance of an Executive Advisory Board comprised of lead partners from several citywide and statewide organizations, including the Office of Mayor Thomas M. Menino, Boston Centers for Youth and Families, the Family Nurturing Center, and the Boston Housing Authority.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

KEY INVESTORS

- The Boston Foundation
- Children’s Hospital Boston
- The Cox Foundation
- Fireman Foundation
- The Riley Foundation
- Thrive in 5
- United Way

Since its inception, Smart from the Start has benefited from a strong base of foundation and government support. Currently, 20 percent of its revenue comes from City of Boston grants, with the remaining 80 percent from foundation grants. While Smart from the Start is proud of the support it has received from the



city, it recognizes that this may not continue; therefore, it is seeking funding from alternative sources to fund future growth and achieve its goals. To diversify its funding, Smart from the Start plans to attract individual donors and develop earned-income activities consistent with its mission. (For example, a professional training conference is planned.) In addition, Smart from the Start plans to grow its government and foundation funding from new sources.



Success Story: Troy, Smart from the Start Parent

Troy, the father of two toddlers, was just released from prison. Realizing that Smart from the Start had just come to his local community center, he decided to stop in to see what programming was being offered. Troy was determined not to fall back into the same patterns that had gotten him into trouble before, but he needed someone to help him. Smart from the Start staff welcomed Troy and immediately got to work helping him identify his short- and long-term goals. He is now enrolled in GED classes, has used Smart from the Start’s computer lab to find CORI-friendly work opportunities, and is participating in the Fathering Support program to rebuild his relationship with his children. He and his children are enrolled in play-to-learn groups and the Nurturing Program.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT

Program Performance and Organizational Health: Below is a summary of the key measures that Smart from the Start will track to demonstrate progress, capture lessons learned, and make course corrections. Note: Fiscal year is July 1- June 30.

	FY 2011	FY 2012 (P)	FY 2013 (P)
Program Performance			
Number of children served	670	800	1,000
Number of families served	450	550	650
Number of sites/neighborhoods	6	7	8
Number of groups/classes/programs offered	52	70	85
Number of community agencies collaborating at sites	70	85	100
Number of Community Unity Partners	55	65	75
Organizational Health/Capacity-Building			
Number of staff (FTE)	9.25	11.5	13
Add program facilitators and early childhood specialists	n/a	Search and hire	Search and hire
Add development coordinator (part time)	n/a	Search and hire	n/a
Number of participants in community partner trainings	32	50	70
Number of parent leaders/advocates trained	22	36	50
Total revenue	\$915,000	\$1.03 million	\$1.22 million

SOCIAL IMPACT

Since its launch in 2008, Smart from the Start has taken a developmental approach to evaluation, which gradually increases the number of tools used and indicators measured. Currently, Smart from the Start uses the metrics below to measure its effect on children and families, based on analysis from outside evaluators. While measuring effect on a community level presents complexities, a tool to assess this is under development.

	Indicator	FY 2010
Children	Children showing increased language/literacy skills	77%
	Children displaying positive social/emotional growth	76%
Families	Families now reading more to their children	92%
	Families who have taken advantage of referrals for adult education opportunities	91%
	Families now expressing themselves more positively with their children	72%
	Caregivers setting and achieving personal and family goals	70%
	Families who report feeling less isolated	67%



Success Story: Derek

Jackie cared for her grandson Derek so her daughter could work. When her daughter tried to enroll him in a childcare center just before his 4th birthday, they would not take Derek because his speech was dramatically delayed. Jackie enrolled Derek in Smart from the Start's BCYF Gallivan Community Center in Mattapan. The staff immediately had Derek assessed to determine if he had a learning disability. His developmental assessment did not indicate any significant learning challenges. Derek began participating in play groups, field trips, and other Smart from the Start play-to-learn activities. Staff worked closely with Jackie to provide tools necessary to continue Derek's learning at home, including reading and singing with him every day, engaging him in conversation while cooking and bathing, and spending more time playing with him rather than watching TV. With this focused effort at home and participation in Smart from the Start programs, Derek began to speak. He is now 5 and attends a regular education kindergarten classroom in the Boston Public Schools.